

What's so funny about Latin then, Alex?

26-year-old Alex Horne has already established a remarkable reputation among critics, comics, and audiences as a gifted gag-smith, prolific writer and one of the most creative solo performers at work in the world of stand-up comedy. The dark secret that he read classics at university has now come out through the show with which he is currently touring, When in Rome. Roman Town Tour MMVI (2006) (done with his regular straight-man Tim Key). Omnibus sent Tim Whitmarsh to look into the phenomenon. His first question was:

What's so funny about Latin then, Alex?

When I was 11 years old the funniest thing about Latin was changing the title of *Approach to Latin* to *Approach to Eating*. Now that I'm a comedian things haven't really changed. For me, knowing a bit of Latin and being interested in language opens up so many doors for word play and verbal jokes. I've always liked linguistic trickery and Latin only encourages me to look for even more complicated and groan-worthy puns.

In your Comedy Store show, you say you grew up in Sweden, then correct yourself to Swindon. Is that true? Can you tell Omnibus readers a little about your background?

I've got a mirror and a picture of a boat. There, some linguistic trickery for you. I'm afraid a lot of what I say in my stand-up isn't true. It's 95% lies. In fact that statistic isn't true either. I actually grew up in a small town called Midhurst in West Sussex whilst being educated in Haslemere and then Lancing. I left school at the age of 18 and my mum said I should take a year off. I was then 17 again. Frustrating.

After failing to get into colleges at both Oxford and Cambridge I was finally let into Carol Vorderman's old home, Sidney Sussex, where I went on a mental safari and decided to learn German. After a term I left again because German and I really didn't get on, and returned the next year to embark, at last, on a Classics degree.

The undergraduate experience, with its blend of study and nuttiness, seems to have been formative. Do you think Classics in parti-cular helped shape you, or could it have been any subject? Might you have been doing stand-up about management theory or tort law?

I think the Classics teachers helped mould me into whatever shape I am now. From school to university I've always found them the most fascinating and inspirationally eccentric people in each institution. I'm sure you've got to be fairly passionate about any subject to decide to spend your life telling other people about it for not an awful lot of honk, but to decide to spend your life telling people about a supposedly dead language always seems to instil a particularly zealous and entertaining passion that I hope has partially rubbed off on me.

Your shows often build on the absurdities of academia. For example, the 2003 Perrier-nominated show 'Making Fish Laugh' was based on a 1976 conference about the effects of laughter. Is it fair to describe you as a highbrow comedian?

I wouldn't describe myself as a highbrow comedian. Mainly because I think that would make me sound like a bit of a prat. And really there isn't anything genuinely intellectual to the shows: I just pick a subject I'm interested in, then try to engage the audience by making it funny. It just happens that I'm interested in vaguely bookish subjects and have got a slightly geeky

persona. I have to say, though, that sometimes being pigeon-holed is a very good thing. It does mean that certain audiences (stag nights/hen nights/very very drunk people) don't often find themselves in a show all about Latin on their big night out and I don't have to look after them from that point on.

Does *When in Rome*, your show about Latin, follow the same kind of format? That's to say, you take a 'difficult' academic subject and make it accessible with lots of audience participation, while at the same time having a gentle poke at snooty donnish types?

To be honest, we barely even tickle the snooty donnish types in this show. There is a lot of audience participation, mainly because most of the audience tends not to have any Latin knowledge at all so a lot of the fun comes from trying to teach an ancient tongue in under an hour whilst making jokes and keeping everybody entertained. It's a very silly show really.

In your shows, you seem to play several roles at once: teacher, master of ceremonies, stand-up wise-cracker. Are you conscious of that? I wonder particularly about the 'academic' aspect of your stage persona, whether you ever feel the need to rein that in and balance things out.

I always think that if you're trying to get away with apparently dry content like body-language or bird-watching (the subject of next year's show), it's very useful to play around with the style so the performance doesn't become a lecture. I do, therefore, try to muck around with my role and make sure the audience doesn't quite know what's going to happen next.

You have done solo shows, but you also appear with your sidekick, Tim. Do you prefer working in a pair? Or did you need someone to operate the powerpoint?

Whilst I do my stand-up on my own, all my longer Edinburgh shows I've written and performed with my hapless but precocious sidekick, Tim Key. I definitely do prefer working in a pair, mainly because it makes those difficult moments before or after a show more bearable. It's very good to have someone to share the highs and lows of festivals and tours. The only trouble with Tim is that he doesn't actually like Latin. He thinks it's a pointless subject to learn: 'Latin's full of ginger' is one of his favourite phrases (he doesn't like ginger). And unfortunately he likes bird-watching even less, so next year I really will be on my own – which is slightly scary but exciting at the same time.

Can you describe the double-act relationship? He is sometimes the fall guy for your jokes, but it's not quite a straight-man / funny-man relationship. You're not Morecambe and Wise. Nor is he your 'Statto', as one reviewer puts it: it seems to me a warmer, more collaborative relationship than that.

I like to think he's the John McEnroe to my Pat Cash in the BBC's coverage of Wimbledon, but that's probably just me. We've not really planned the relationship, it's been quite an organic association that continues to develop each year. But I think *The Times* described us best as 'Straight man and straighter man'.

Do you have any particular role models, either for yourself or for the double act? I wondered about Fry and Laurie.

Well apart from Cash and McEnroe I suppose I'd have to say Vic and Bob. I used to watch them all the time before getting

into comedy and I'd love to take as many risks as they did. In terms of Fry and Laurie, Tim is a massive *Jeeves and Wooster* fan while I've never really been able to get into them but I'd definitely take any sort of comparison as a compliment.

Do you find ancient humour funny? Personally I've never found much to smile about in Aristophanes, Menander, or Juvenal, although Lucian is a giggle.

Comedy has certainly changed since Aristophanes was the main man and I have to say that I do find modern humour more amusing. If pushed though, I'd go for *Philogelos* and Martial as my top two classic comics: here's a quick one from the *Epigrams*:

*Morio dictus erat: viginti milibus emi.
redde mihi nummos, Gargiliane: sapit.*

*He'd been called a fool: I bought him for 20,000 sesterces.
Give me back my money, Gargilianus: he has sense.*

The scholarship is often funnier than the ancient authors themselves. There's a 1979 book called *Irony in Juvenal*, which divides irony into various types. Most of the book then consists of tables and percentage charts. I thought of that when I saw your show based on the Cardiff conference on laughter: it's amazing how humourlessly scholars can treat the subject of humour.

Yes, I guess I'm meant to be doing the opposite: a humorist humorously treating the subject of scholarship – or something.

Are you the most famous person you know? Or do you hang out with celebs now?

Much to my annoyance, Tim is probably the most famous person I know, having dared to plough his own furrow in both Steve Coogan and Armando Iannucci's new programmes as well as one of those *Nationwide* adverts. And he's pretty much the only person I hang out with. Except my wife, who's actually a reporter on the BBC2 business news programme, *Working Lunch*. She's very very good!

Sorry but I have to ask: can you give us a joke?

You've had one in Latin so here's my favourite from Greece: When a distinguished man was being buried in Kyme, someone came up and asked the mourners: 'Who's the dead man?' One of the Kymeans turned around and pointed and said: 'That guy lying on the bier.'

What's E.T. short for?'

I remember telling this joke when I was about 9 years old, even though I didn't actually understand it till I was a teenager. It's all about timing.

No more jokes from me then. What are your plans for the future?

Well, we're now taking the show to schools around the country – and not just those found in Roman towns. Doing the show for a younger audience presents a whole different lot of challenges to those posed by stag parties in Birmingham but they are generally much more rewarding. We've so far performed in front of and with students aged between 8 and 18 and I think we're just about getting the hang of appealing to their senses of humour whilst offering them a very small amount of education at the same time.

Thanks very much indeed, Alex, for taking the time to talk to *Omnibus*.

For more information on Alex's shows, visit <http://www.alex-horne.com/>